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Amplifying Youth Voices Through Ethnodrama Research

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AUTHOR



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Emily Schorr Lesnick is a New York-based educator, theatremaker, and facilitator. She is a teacher and administrator at Riverdale Country School in the Bronx and is the co-creator of How We GLOW, a piece of interview theater that explores LGBTQ+ youth identity, which has performed at more than 30 schools and community spaces. She completed her master's degree in Educational Theater from NYU Steinhardt and currently serves on GLSEN's Educator Advisory Committee.



Jamila Humphrie

Jamila Humphrie is a researcher, producer, and administrator. She is a co-creator of How We GLOW, a piece of interview theatre that explores LGBTQ+ youth identity, which has performed at more than 30 schools and community spaces. Her work is driven by a social justice framework to achieve equity for all students. In 2016, Jamila served in the final class of interns with the Obama Administration in the Office of the First Lady, Michelle Obama. Jamila is also a Fulbright Scholar and is a Ph.D. candidate in Educational Leadership at NYU. She currently serves on the Educator Advisory Committee for GLSEN. In her free time, Jamila works full-time at NYU School of Law as an assistant director of alumni relations.

*technically it's not anyone's business how I identify
but at the same time
I wanted the comfort that
um
a lot of heterosexual people have
knowing that they can identify how they would like to
and
you know
no one questions it
or forces another label upon them
I wanted to be myself fully
and not have to hide any of that*

—Ryan De La Cruz in an interview on her decision to come out to her school*

If we wish to tell compelling and inclusive narratives about our schools and communities, we must listen to the stories around us. To achieve this, we use *How We GLOW*, a method of qualitative research called ethnodrama that combines ethnography with theatrical storytelling.

Our experience has shown that such research enables people to deeply understand trends and demographics — and leads to an authentic portrayal of truth. In this blog, we outline our research experiences, our findings around LGBTQ+ youth identity, and some ways to apply the findings in schools.

Background

In our view, too much of youth work talks *about* youth, rather than *with* youth. We decided to take a different approach. Carrying a curiosity about young people's experiences and a desire to hear their voices, we created *How We GLOW*, blending traditional ethnographic interviews with theatrical storytelling tools.

Ethnodrama draws on the anthropological process of describing, interpreting, and constructing cultural behavior. This method lends itself to understand the ways people create their own cultural meaning. Ethnotheater, the performance of ethnodrama, bears witness to stories and moves us toward empathy and reflection.

Researchers Judith Ackroyd and John O'Toole write of ethnodrama in *Performing Research*: "It's a natural development of the new-found confidence in acknowledging the subjectivity of their [researchers'] human research and of celebrating rather than reducing the richness of rich data."

As co-researchers and collaborators, we've found that being part of GLOW (Gay, Lesbian, or Whatever), a gender and sexuality student discussion group, has offered us opportunities to support LGBTQ+ youth (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and beyond), explore new labels and terminology, and understand the issues that most affect LGBTQ+ students. The question of labels emerged from informal discussion with young people, and we launched our research from several questions that sparked our imaginations.

- Are young people rejecting labels more?
- Are they creating new ones that are more specific to their experiences?
- Depending on the labels chosen or rejected by youth, what are the implications for community building?
- Do they find community in schools? Online?
- How does one build solidarity among the alphabet soup?

Methodology

To begin, we narrowed our scope to youth between the ages of 14 and 24. We reached out to email listservs of LGBTQ+ students in high schools and universities, and connected with educators who put us in touch with interview participants. We asked participants the following questions:

- How would you describe your identity and how did you come to understand it?
- Do you have a coming out story or stories to share with us?
- Do you or have you participated in any identity-based groups in your school or elsewhere?
- What do you think is the biggest issue or issues facing the LGBTQ+ community?
- What do you know about the Stonewall Riots/Rebellion?

We conducted 21 interviews with participants from a mix of schools in New York. Seven were college students, five attended public school, six attended

independent school, and two had dropped out of school. (We interviewed one person twice.) Interviewees had the option to share their name or use a pseudonym. This practice and others were informed and approved by NYU's University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects.

After completing the interviews, we coded the data for emergent themes, including:

- public or performative coming out experiences,
- generational divide between parents and/or teachers,
- identity exploration, and
- intra-community differences.

Then, we transcribed the interviews verbatim, including every uh, um, and pause. Our method borrows from the style of MacArthur Genius/researcher/actor/playwright Anna Deavere Smith and theatremaker/professor Joe Salvatore, which aims to capture the poetry of human speech verbatim. The richest details, the patterns and pauses of speech, illuminate as much about people as the content of their words. Using a "hard return" to connote a break in the flow of speech really imitates each person as a unique character in this play.

We interviewed everyone one-on-one, and discovered that many stories from our conversations aligned or conflicted with one another. Theater allowed us to explore these tensions and divergences. We wove the transcriptions into a script that featured sections from 11 of our 21 interviews. The excerpt below demonstrates our method and the dialogue between interviewees.

ASIA

um

I know that a lot of issues
outside of the community itself that are kind of
facing us
but I

JENNY

I think one issue with the lgbt
like community is that everyone that's not in it kind of thinks
that it's like this
happy rainbow

ASIA

the way we regard each other
inside the community
is the most like
crucial thing
that we've ever faced
and it's still something that's a really big problem
um
like
just
like hate in the community itself

JENNY

like
warm community
where everyone automatically like
love each other and is there for each other
and that's not always true and I think it's because

ASIA

of watching people be like
oh
that's not a real thing
or
like
nobody has it as bad as we have it
or like people
inside of the community looking at other people
like
in the community thinking
they don't belong here

By placing Asia and Jenny in conversation, we could illuminate the feelings of both being within and a part of a community.

Then, we worked with actors to devise parts of the performance and presented the show to our community of friends and colleagues through The Tank, an independent arts presenter in New York City that supports emerging artists to show their work at little or no cost. We intentionally cast actors in roles that were incongruous with their racial or gender experiences because we wanted the

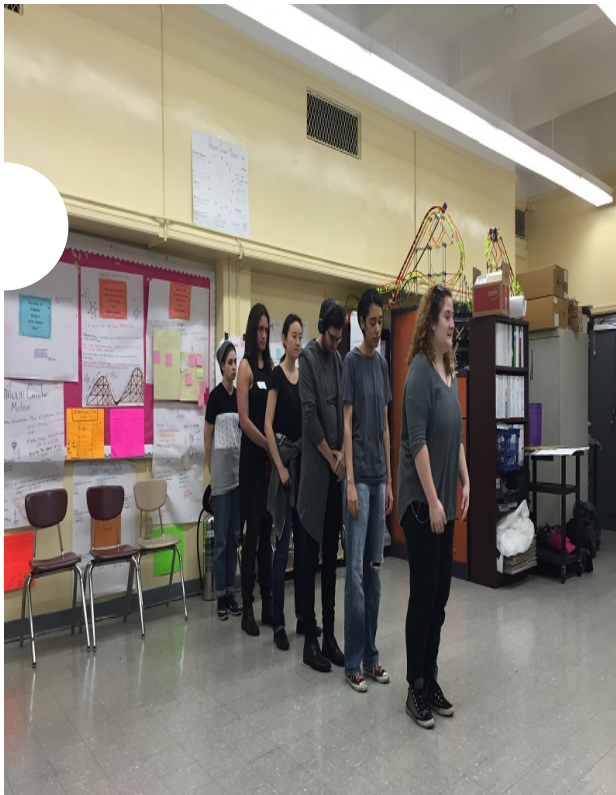
audience to challenge their assumptions about the stories we ascribe onto certain bodies.

Feedback

After the first performance in Brooklyn, educators and youth in our audience encouraged us to share the piece with schools, and we have spent the past two years taking the show to assemblies, conferences, and festivals worldwide.

We have performed for students as young as 10, in gymnasiums of large public schools, and in black box theaters of selective independent schools. Some schools organized pre-discussions in advisory groups, and each performance ended with a larger discussion to clarify language, provide space for student reflection and testimonials, and ask about our process.

We've found that sharing the piece in schools has allowed for simultaneous exposure to LGBTQ+ voices for straight or cisgender students, as well as an affirmation for LGBTQ+ students.



Practicing Art

Photos courtesy of Emily Schorr Lesnick and Jamila Humphrie.



Setting the Stage

Riverdale Country School Stage

In the

Riverdal Perform

More Results

The stories of LGBTQ+ youth revealed the powerful intersection of identities: age as a social identifier uniquely impacted youth gender and sexual identities, alongside race, class, religion, family structure, and nationality/location. Age was the lens through which each person navigated their experiences.

Additionally, interviewees identified homelessness and intra-group divisions such as racism and the “oppression Olympics,” i.e. the way oppressed people sometimes view one another in competition rather than in solidarity, as significant issues facing their communities both in school in New York and online. (Interestingly, nobody identified marriage as a key issue, even during our interview period of spring 2015.) Lastly, although the ways that youth engaged with labels varied, their decision to claim or reject a label almost always came through resources and

dialogue on the internet. Facebook groups brought youth together with other young people outside of their social circles to build virtual support communities and raise consciousness.

Applications

Ethnotheater, particularly the verbatim form, is a tool that can be applied to many communities to gather memories and capture a voice of an institution. For example, Anna Deavere Smith created a play by zooming in on a place (Crown Heights, Brooklyn) and excavating the feelings that emerged from that place's notoriety in "Fires in The Mirror"; Joe Salvatore explored love and relationships in his play "Open Heart."

In ethnotheater, content is flexible to a community's needs, as are the steps within the process. For *How We GLOW*, we conducted the research and brought actors in at the performance stage. At the Chapin School in New York in 2015, student actors were involved in the interviews, transcription, scriptmaking and production of the play "We Were All Young Once" (under the guidance of Joe Salvatore). At NYU School of Law, the communications team interviewed students about their experiences in the classroom, and other students read one another's stories in an audio project to present to professors.

We hope schools will consider how they might use qualitative research to explore complex issues in their communities. For many, storytelling is a means of survival, of reaching into the past, present, and future of a community or institution. Because school communities observe multiple generations of the same families, ethnodramas can act as historical narratives of the schools themselves. In these cases, students can both be seen in and create these narratives.

We believe educators can employ ethnotheater to conduct school-focused and school-driven research. Admission officers can use it to talk about students' experiences, faculty can use it to discuss school climate, communications officers can use it in the school's alumni magazine, and students can use it to share their voices on their own terms. As we have found, the stories that are the most difficult to hear or tell may be the most important to share and help to build safer, stronger school communities.

[Download a PDF of the graphic below.](#)



ETHNODRAMA

Storytelling in your school community

Identify an issue

This may be determined by school administration, by students, or other community members or stakeholders. This issue may emerge through informal conversations, surveys, or a crisis in your school community.



tell me
more...



Interview

Work within your community to identify people to interview, explain to them the process (that their stories are part of a larger research project) and conduct interviews using research questions to guide the conversation. You can use a smartphone to record the interviews.

Develop Questions

The research question should be what you want to know most about the issue. The interview questions will prompt your interviewees to respond and tell their stories.

Please consider that if you are wanting to capture stories that are representative of your community that you work diligently and intentionally to include a diverse group of perspectives. If you are working to engage with a particular identity group, as we did in How We GLOW, attention must be paid to how you initially solicit your sample group.

Review & Code

In listening to the interviews, begin to determine the most salient and consistent themes. Don't be afraid to explore difference or dissonance.



Share

In ethnotheatre, rather than writing a paper and presenting your findings, the presentation comes in the form of performance. Determine what audience will be most responsive to (or most in need of) these stories, and share your research findings. Perhaps a post-performance community dialogue is an integral part of the performance; perhaps it is a written reflection or other activity.

Creating a word cloud might be helpful and will help isolate the most compelling stories and experiences. .

Stories are personal, and should be treated with extreme care.

Created by Emily Schorr Lesnick, 2017

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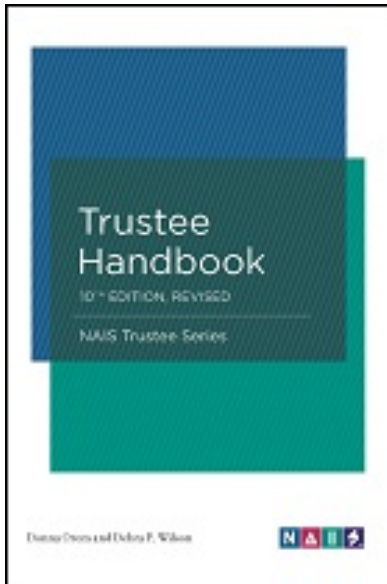
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